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The Irish Rovers were at Place des Arts last night as part of COJO's arts and culture program.

'Just folks'

Rovers top COJO box-office

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
for The Gazette

That The Irish Rovers should be the top box-office music attraction of COJO's arts program (along with Blood Sweat & Tears) indicates the severe limitations of the Olympic music series.

The Rovers have always done well in this town and, of course, they qualify as "Canadian talent" — to fit within the COJO boundaries — because the Irishmen are naturalized Canadians. This country gave the group an opportunity on the Western bar and lounge circuit to work out an act before they struck international fame with the huge hit, *The Unicorn*.

Despite the fact that the Rovers' popular television show is produced by CBC, there isn't much that is Canadian in their act. In fact, they almost owe more to a slick showbiz tradition than to Irish music.

Lead singer Will Millar and five others have taken a smooth approach to folklore, distilling the music much as the Kingston Trio did for folk music in the early 1960s. The group acts like "just folks" on stage, getting the audience involved with songs that are easy to listen to and tales that are not difficult to understand.

They appeal to "the Irish" in everyone and, in these troubled times, the schtick is relaxing.

The lack of spontaneity in their formula is put across with a considerable degree of competence. The instrumentation — accordians, mandolins and the like — is well-done, if predictable and totally uninspiring musically.

But the Rovers do not seek to shock or outrage; they are strictly entertainers striving for a common denominator and succeeding to attract audiences who want a good time with a minimum of fuss.

But even the culture program had to be coaxed into this financial success by impressario Francois Chartrand. This was the middle-of-the-road show that is inevitable in any special music series, but there were not enough other representative music stars from Canada in the COJO line-up.

By going for a large number of local musicians, instead of a few legitimate Canadian stars such as The Band and Joni Mitchell, the COJO presentations were locked into provincialism, in which the left-field success of The Irish Rovers is assured.

New record picks best of banal Olympic songs

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
for The Gazette

A long-playing disc of the 10 finalists of the Olympic song contest was released yesterday.

The songs were chosen from nearly 300 entries by professional and amateur songwriters and composers across the country, with more than 60 per cent from Quebec.

Of the 10 finalists — chosen by a jury of 18 local music critics, commentators and functionairies — seven are in French, two in English and one is an instrumental.

The winning song will bring its composer $20,000 and will be announced Aug. 1, immediately after the Games' closing ceremony, and will be heard by as many as a billion people watching the event on television.

At a press conference yesterday, Stephanne Venne, president of the contest jury (and composer of the Expo 67 theme song), said the record was released to let the world know how Canadian songwriters view the Olympic spirit.

He added that 25 per cent of the royalties on the record's sales will be retained by the COJO arts and culture committee, which co-produced the disc with the help of the songwriters. COJO officials expect 30,000 copies of the album will be sold within a week after its release.

The previous Montreal Olympic song, sung by Quebec teenage star Rene Simard, had faded into obscurity soon after its release last year, prompting an official song contest.

Asked why the new song was not chosen at the start of the Games, Venne said that "marketing considerations" and the build-up of interest in the songs during the Games accounted for the post-Olympic unveiling.

As a member of the jury which narrowed the field down to 10 songs, I cannot comment on the merits of the recorded selections.

However, it can be said that the Olympic song contest was not one of the glowing events in Canadian songwriting history. A number of well-known Canadian singing stars and writers entered, yet many of their efforts were barely more competent than the eager-beaver amateur contestants.

Generally, musical simplicity and lack of sophistication characterized the entries; there was much banality in the guise of celebration, as well as simpering recitations of lofty ideals and romantic reveries.

The themes could for the most part be divided into two types — much breast-beating about Montreal being the centre of humanity, civilization and sportsmanship, and all the other big empty cliches; or Montreal as a metaphor for love and romance ("I will return to you Montreal . . ." etc.). Consequently, many of the songs merely sounded like awkward roundhouse stabs in the dark; they groped for ideals like the poetry in high school yearbooks.

The 10 finalists (with their singers in brackets) are:

A bientôt, by P. Letourneau and G. Gauthier (Yannic Letourneau, Pierre Létourneau); *For Humanity*, by B. Edwards and F. Napoli (June Wallack); *Friends*, by Charles Linton (Linton); *Je t'aime* by J. Robitaille and C. St. Roch (Estelle Ste. Croix); *Les oiseaux d'Athènes*, by J. P. Guay and M. Lepage (instrumental); *L'or, l'argent, le bronze*, by P. Bourgault and P. Vyvial (Phillippe Vivial); *Mon pays c'est le monde*, by L. Plamondon and F. Cousineau (chorus); *Prends mon coeur*, by Herve Brousseau (Brousseau); *Revenez à Montréal*, by R. Gauthier and F. Dompierre (Pierre Lalonde); and *Souviens-toi de Montréal*, by M. Bradley and Dompierre (Dorothy Berryman).

Poor crowds leave 'Splash' high and dry in Halifax

By JAMIE PORTMAN
Southam News Services

HALIFAX — You'd think the title of the show alone would be enough to attract audiences.

After all, it's not every day you encounter an entertainment called *Doc Regan's Truly Incredible Free Fun Goodtime Travelling Medicine Show*.

The audiences which are turning out are enthusiastic enough, but unfortunately they're not large enough. In box-office terms, *Doc Regan's Medicine Show* is in serious trouble. The bottom has dropped out of Halifax's normally robust summer theatre season.

Medicine Show is one of three items being offered this summer under the general billing of *Sun Splash'76*, and organizers are in despair over poor attendance.

Tease For Two, the David Warrack cabaret revue which played for nearly a year in Toronto, has been sharing the summer repertory with *Medicine Show*, and it hasn't been doing well either.

It's not for want of trying that *Sun Splash '76* has failed to make a splash with the public. The season has been actively promoted both in the press and through hotels and tourist offices. The first two productions received dream press notices. Furthermore, Halifax has always been considered a good summer theatre town.

Indeed, it was only after Halifax' established Neptune Theatre Company was forced to cancel its summer season because of financial problems that the Sun Splash people moved in and rented the Neptune facilities.

They thought they had a built-in audience, but so far that audience hasn't materialized.

Also suffering attendance doldrums is Theatre New Brunswick. Its visiting production of the comedy *Relatively Speaking* is playing to pitifully small audiences at the Dalhousie Arts Centre.

Sun Splash is a project of Errant Productions, a team of theatre artists with wide experience in Canadian theatre. One of the founders is Heinar Pillar, who has served as artistic director of both Theatre London and the Neptune in Halifax.

Pillar, whose own Halifax years led him to expect good audiences, is as puzzled as his colleagues about the poor turn-outs.

And he admits there's no easy explanation. The fact that Nova Scotia's tourist volume is down this summer isn't a satisfactory answer. Tourism is also down on neighboring Prince Edward Island, but the Charlottetown Festival is booming.

This 'Anne' could run forever

By JAMIE PORTMAN
Southam News Services

CHARLOTTETOWN — London may have its long-running *The Mousetrap*, and New York may have the similarly durable *The Fantasticks*. But Canada has *Anne Of Green Gables* - now in its 12th season as the proud centrepiece of the Charlottetown Festival.

It's difficult to determine whether it was an act of foolhardy audacity or an act of faith for Charlottetown to proceed with a musical version of a beloved and ever-green classic of Canadian writing. In retrospect, both boldness and faith probably played a role.

What's important was that that the chemistry was right. Norman Campbell's infectious and often touching musical score, Donald Harron's book and lyrics, Alan Lund's superb staging — all combined, not only to evoke the spirit of L. M. Montgomery's novel, but to create an unusually affecting theatre experience.

And when one returns to a performance of *Anne Of Green Gables* after a few years, one is struck afresh by what a remarkably fine show it is.

There's a universality to the Anne story — hence, the fact that it has been translated into some 60 languages. It hearkens back to a seemingly golden period before the carnage of the First World War — a period when life seemed to be simpler yet better. Nostalgia for a past which few of us remember can be a curiously gripping emotion.

Yet, *Anne* rests on firmer underpinnings than mere nostalgia. The musical, like the novel, is essentially a study in character and personal relationships — of how one outspoken, maddening but incredibly lovable child can alter lives.

Malorie-Ann Spiller, now in her third season as Anne, is irrepressible in personality, irreproachable in her musical and dramatic capabilities, and irresistible in impact. There's no reason why a show like this can't run forever.

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